

Whistleblowers worldwide across two periods 1969–2018 and 2019–present

Executive summary

“Whistleblowing” over the last half-century has taken two dominant forms in the public record: (1) **leaks of classified or privileged material** revealing alleged state wrongdoing (often triggering criminal prosecutions, with disputed public-interest defences), and (2) **insider disclosures in corporate and regulated sectors** (often producing fines, structural reforms, and—more recently—stronger legal recognition of the whistleblower’s rights). The evidence base is uneven: national-security cases tend to have clearer “who disclosed what and when” plus extensive investigative response, while corporate cases often feature sealed settlements and partial public documentation. (See Supreme Court record for the Pentagon Papers; UK parliamentary record on the GCHQ case; European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence on LuxLeaks; and US/EU official disclosures and hearings.) ¹

This report is **not a complete census** of all whistleblowers worldwide (1969–present). It is a **high-confidence, multi-sector, multi-jurisdiction set of cases** selected because (a) the whistleblower and disclosure are well-documented, and (b) actions and outcomes are traceable in **primary/authoritative sources** such as court records, parliamentarians’ records/Hansard, official inquiries, regulators’ reports, and major investigative collaborations. Limitations and “near-miss” exclusions are set out explicitly. ²

Across the two periods, several patterns recur:

- **Retaliation is common** (criminal charges, termination, professional blacklisting, or exile), especially where the employer is a **national security apparatus** or where the disclosure involves classified information. ³
- **Institutional accountability tends to be indirect** in national-security cases (policy reforms, oversight reports, legislative changes) rather than prosecutions of “perpetrators”. ⁴
- **Corporate/financial whistleblowing more frequently yields formal enforcement outcomes** (deferred prosecution agreements, guilty pleas, forfeitures, regulatory fines), but the whistleblower can still face personal legal exposure (e.g., for data handling or confidentiality). ⁵

Methodology, inclusion criteria, and scope limits

Inclusion criteria

A case is included in the period tables only if the public record supports **all** of the following:

- A **named** whistleblower (or explicitly acknowledged pseudonym/anonymous source) tied to the disclosure;
- A **clear description of what was disclosed** and **when**;

- **Authoritative sources** that document (i) actions taken against the whistleblower and (ii) actions taken against organisations or perpetrators (investigations, prosecutions, reforms, fines, admissions, etc.). ⁶

Sources prioritised

Primary and authoritative sources used here include:

US Supreme Court decision records, UK Hansard, US congressional hearing records (govinfo), Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB) oversight reports, European Court of Human Rights (HUDOC) judgments, government regulator press releases, major investigative consortia (ICIJ), and major newspaper reporting where it anchors facts to official documents or contemporaneous events. ⁷

Known limitations

Paywalls and access constraints affect some documents (for example, certain archives of The New York Times ⁸, The Washington Post ⁹, and Le Monde ¹⁰). Court files may be sealed, and FOI releases are jurisdiction-specific and often slow. For non-English jurisdictions, English-language primary records can be incomplete (language limitations are noted). ¹¹

Country codes used in the tables

To keep the tables readable, countries are listed as codes: **US** = United States ¹²; **UK** = United Kingdom ¹³; **LU** = Luxembourg ¹⁴; **DK** = Denmark ¹⁵; **CN** = China ¹⁶; **IL** = Israel ¹⁷; **FR** = France ¹⁸.

Period A cases 1969–2018

The table below is ordered by **date of initial disclosure** (or first major publication), not by the date of later court rulings.

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A1	Daniel Ellsberg ¹⁹	Defence analyst (former RAND/DoD)	US; government/defence policy	Leaked the Pentagon Papers (classified Vietnam War history) to major newspapers; litigation established high bar against prior restraint. ²⁰	June 1971 (publication); charges dismissed May 1973. ²¹	Criminal prosecution under Espionage Act and related charges; case dismissed due to government misconduct and illegal evidence gathering. ²²

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A2	Mordechai Vanunu ²⁵	Nuclear technician	IL; government/ defence (nuclear establishment)	Disclosed Israel's nuclear weapons capability to a UK newspaper; later subject to secret trial materials and continuing restrictions described by rights groups. ²⁶	1986 (disclosure); later trial transcript reporting (public) noted 1999. ²⁷	Imprisonment and later restrictions and further charges described by Amnesty reporting; long-term constraints after release discussed in rights reporting. ²⁸
A3	Jeffrey Wigand ³⁰	Research executive in tobacco company	US; private corporation (tobacco/ health)	Exposed tobacco industry practices (nicotine manipulation and internal knowledge); contributed to public health litigation environment. ³¹	1995–1996 (public disclosures; broadcast and press). ³²	Sued by former employer; faced legal and professional pressure; confidentiality disputes reported contemporaneously. ³³
A4	Sherron Watkins ³⁵	VP of corporate development	US; private corporation (energy/ finance)	Warned senior leadership of accounting irregularities; testified to US Senate on Enron collapse. ³⁶	2001 (internal warning); Feb 2002 (Senate testimony). ³⁷	Employment retaliation details vary; whistleblower became prominent witness; reported pressures exist but are context-dependent. (Mark as “unspecified” where not in primary record.) ³⁷

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A5	Katharine Gun ⁴²	Translator at UK signals agency	UK; government agency (intelligence)	Leaked a memo about an alleged effort to obtain leverage at the UN before the Iraq War; prosecution dropped when Crown offered no evidence (as recorded in Parliament). ⁴³	2003 (leak); Feb 2004 (case discontinued). ⁴⁴	Charged under Official Secrets Act; case discontinued when Crown offered no evidence (Hansard). ⁴³
A6	Chelsea Manning ⁴⁷	US Army intelligence analyst	US; military/government	Provided classified records to WikiLeaks; convicted by court-martial; sentenced to 35 years (later commuted). ⁴⁸	2010 (disclosure); Aug 2013 (sentence). ⁴⁹	Court-martial conviction; long sentence; appellate record confirms adjudged sentence and confinement credit. ⁴⁸

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A7	Edward Snowden ⁵²	Intelligence contractor	US; government contractor / intelligence	Disclosed mass surveillance programmes; charged; triggered official oversight reports and legislative changes including ending bulk telephony metadata collection under Section 215. ⁵³	June 2013 (first publication); charges June 2013. ⁵⁴	Criminal complaint and charges; remains outside US jurisdiction (as reflected in later official statements). ⁵⁵
A8	Antoine Deltour ⁵⁸ and Raphaël Halet ⁵⁹	Auditors (Luxembourg tax rulings)	LU; professional services / corporate	Disclosed confidential tax rulings (LuxLeaks) showing multinational tax arrangements; led to criminal convictions in Luxembourg, later litigation culminating in ECHR ruling recognising whistleblower rights (for Halet). ⁶⁰	2014 (publication of LuxLeaks); subsequent court rulings 2016–2018; ECHR GC judgment 2023. ⁶¹	Criminal proceedings and convictions/fines in Luxembourg courts (details in translated judgment summary and ECHR record). ⁶⁰

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A9	John Doe ⁶⁶ (pseudonym)	Unspecified (anonymous source)	Unspecified; finance/legal services (offshore corporate services)	Leaked Mossack Fonseca files enabling Panama Papers investigation; later issued a public manifesto statement; investigative consortium released database and background documentation. ⁶⁷	Apr 2016 (initial publications); May 2016 (manifesto). ⁶⁸	No public prosecution of the source (identity unknown); source claimed personal risk and sought protections (as reported). ⁶⁹
A10	Reality Winner ⁷³	Government contractor (NSA)	US; government contractor / intelligence	Leaked a classified NSA report about Russian interference to a news outlet; prosecuted and sentenced (63 months). ⁷⁴	June 2017 (leak/arrest); Aug 2018 (sentence). ⁷⁴	Criminal prosecution; DOJ press release confirms sentence; judgment document shows term. ⁷⁴

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
A11	Christopher Wylie ⁷⁷	Director of Research / contractor (as attested to Parliament)	UK/US-linked firm; private tech/political consulting	Disclosed and gave evidence about misuse of Facebook data and political micro-targeting practices; parliamentary record includes written evidence and background papers; UK ICO investigation documented. ⁷⁸	Mar 2018 (public); Mar–Apr 2018 evidence. ⁷⁹	Personal/legal risks debated; whistleblower status contested by some implicated parties; no criminal prosecution of Wylie identified in the UK parliamentary record. ⁸⁰
A12	Howard Wilkinson ⁸⁵	Manager in Baltic operations (as described in EU hearing record)	DK; financial institution	Raised internal concerns about suspicious transactions/ AML failures; later testified (or was referenced) in European parliamentary proceedings; scandal led to major enforcement actions and guilty plea by bank. ⁸⁶	2013–2014 (internal reports); Sept 2018 (public scandal/report); Nov 2018 (EU hearing). ⁸⁷	Retaliation/ protection claims vary and are frequently contested; documentation here focuses on verified: testimony/hearing record and public reporting on role. (Employment impacts: unspecified in primary docs cited.) ⁸⁸

Period B cases 2019–present

Ordered by first documented disclosure/publication date.

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
B1	Li Wenliang ⁹¹	Hospital doctor (ophthalmologist)	CN; healthcare/ public sector	Warned colleagues about a SARS-like outbreak; reprimanded by police for “rumours”; later exoneration recommended by official inquiry; became emblematic case for speech suppression during early COVID response. ⁹²	Dec 2019 (warning); Jan 2020 (reprimand); Mar 2020 (exoneration). ⁹²	Reprimand and coercive warning documented; whistleblower died Feb 2020 (public record) and was posthumously “exonerated” per inquiry reporting. ⁹³
B2	Rick Bright ⁹⁷	Government health official (BARDA director)	US; government agency (public health/ biodefence)	Filed whistleblower complaint alleging retaliation and political interference in pandemic response decisions; testified to Congress; complaint served as primary record of allegations. ⁹⁸	May 2020 (complaint; testimony). ⁹⁸	Reassignment and alleged retaliation; formal whistleblower complaint submitted to OSC; public complaint text released by major outlets. ⁹⁸

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
B3	Unidentified source (name unspecified)	Unspecified (source unknown)	Unspecified; financial intelligence/ government records	Leaked FinCEN suspicious activity report materials enabling FinCEN Files investigations; consortium and major outlets stressed SARs are not themselves proof of wrongdoing for each transaction. ¹⁰¹	Sept 2020 (publication). ¹⁰¹	Unknown; identity and retaliation/ protection are unspecified (by definition). ¹⁰²
B4	Frances Haugen ¹⁰⁵	Product manager at Facebook	US; tech/ social media company	Disclosed internal research and documents about platform harms; provided written testimony and appeared before US Senate Commerce subcommittee. ¹⁰⁶	Oct 2021 (testimony). ¹⁰⁷	Public whistleblower disclosure; professional and legal risks debated; whistleblower sought legislative action. ¹⁰⁸

Case ID	Whistleblower	Role at time	Country (code) & employer class	Disclosure summary	Disclosure date(s)	Actions against whistleblower
B5	Sophie Zhang ¹¹¹	Data scientist (platform integrity)	US/UK proceedings; tech/social media company	Reported internal and external concerns about “fake engagement” and political manipulation; later provided evidence to UK Parliament legislative scrutiny process. ¹¹²	Sept 2020 (internal departure memo context); Apr 2021 (public reporting); Oct 2021 (UK parliamentary evidence). ¹¹²	Employment ended (she left/was terminated—details vary by account); she declined severance with non-disparagement per reporting; formal parliamentary evidence submitted. ¹¹³
B6	Mark MacGann ¹¹⁸	Former chief lobbyist (Europe/ EMEA)	Global; tech/ transport platform company	Leaked “Uber Files” records to journalists; identified himself publicly; later gave testimony to European Parliament committee. ¹¹⁹	Jul 2022 (leak/ publication); Oct 2022 (EU Parliament hearing). ¹²⁰	Public exposure and legal disputes; Uber publicly challenged motives, noting prior litigation and settlement (reported). ¹²¹

Cross-cutting patterns and outcomes

Employer class strongly predicts the type of retaliation. National-security disclosures (A1, A5, A6, A7, A10) reliably generate **criminal charges** or coercive legal processes, supported by secrecy laws (Espionage Act / Official Secrets Act / military justice). ¹²³ Corporate/financial disclosures more often trigger **civil litigation, confidentiality claims, or regulatory investigations**, but the whistleblower is still exposed to legal risk where data handling or confidentiality is central (A8, A9, A11, A12). ¹²⁴

Accountability pathways differ by sector. In the surveillance cluster (A7), the most traceable “action against the system” is often **institutional reform**: oversight reports, transparency requirements, and statutory change ending specific practices (e.g., bulk telephony metadata collection). ⁴ In corporate finance (A12), formal accountability may reach a **guilty plea and forfeiture** level, with parallel regulator settlements and publicly released investigation reports. ¹²⁵

Legal recognition of whistleblower rights is advancing—unevenly. The ECHR Grand Chamber’s decision (A8) is unusually explicit in weighing freedom of expression against duties of loyalty and confidentiality, signalling stronger legal protections in Europe over time (even when the underlying disclosure occurred in the earlier period). ¹²⁶ By contrast, many national-security whistleblowers face restrictive public-interest defences, with disputes playing out in politics rather than courts. ¹²⁷

Media-platform whistleblowing since 2019 shows a shift from state secrecy to “system safety.” The platform cases (B4, B5) are oriented around internal research, algorithmic incentives, and societal harms; they use legislative testimony and documentary release as the accountability mechanism more often than criminal litigation. ¹²⁸

Near-misses and exclusions

This report excludes many plausible “whistleblowers” because they fail inclusion criteria (insufficient primary documentation, unclear disclosure date(s), unclear retaliation/outcome record, or the “whistleblower” is better characterised as a journalist, activist, or litigant rather than an insider discloser). Examples of **near-miss categories** (not exhaustive):

- **Large investigative projects driven by FOI** rather than a whistleblower (e.g., FOI-based “papers” projects), where there is no individual whistleblower to profile under the requested schema.
- **Leakers whose identity is widely speculated but not credibly confirmed**, or whose disclosure record is primarily in non-authoritative sources.
- **Ongoing litigation where core evidence is sealed**, making it impossible to provide high-confidence claims about what was disclosed and what official findings exist without over-reliance on secondary commentary.

Where high-quality primary sources emerge (court judgments, official inquiry reports, authenticated document dumps, or parliamentary transcripts), such cases can be added without changing the method.

Source catalogue grouped by case

The links below are **direct, primary/authoritative sources** used for each case ID (citations are clickable links).

A1 — Supreme Court decision PDF. ²⁴

A1 — Federal Judicial Center historical synthesis with dismissal context. ¹²⁹

A1 — Contemporaneous reporting on dismissal (historical archive). ¹³⁰

A2 — Major newspaper reporting on publication of secret trial transcripts. ²⁷

A2 — Rights reporting on post-release restrictions/charges. ²⁸

A3 — Contemporary major newspaper coverage of employer lawsuit and confidentiality dispute. ³³

A3 — Public-health literature connecting whistleblower cooperation to broader litigation context. ³⁴

A3 — Broadcast network summary (for timing/context; secondary but authoritative). ¹³¹

A4 — US Senate hearing record (prepared statement and testimony). ³⁷

A4 — DOJ press release on executive sentencing. ¹³²

A4 — SEC statement on verdict. ¹³³

- A5** — UK Hansard record confirming the Crown offered no evidence; case discontinued. 43
- A6** — US Army Court of Criminal Appeals opinion confirming conviction and adjudged sentence. 48
- A7** — DOJ statement concerning provisional arrest request to Hong Kong. 134
- A7** — PCLOB Section 215 report PDF. 135
- A7** — US intelligence community fact sheet on USA FREEDOM Act implementation and end of bulk metadata collection. 136
- A7** — USA FREEDOM Act (public law page). 137
- A8** — Summary translation of Luxembourg appeal judgment (LuxLeaks) PDF. 138
- A8** — ECHR HUDOC Grand Chamber judgment (HTML). 139
- A8** — ECHR press-release PDF (quick official summary). 140
- A8** — EU Parliament briefing describing LuxLeaks parties and protection context. 141
- A9** — ICIJ publication of “John Doe” manifesto statement. 142
- A9** — Süddeutsche Zeitung manifesto page. 143
- A9** — ICIJ database release announcement. 144
- A9** — Example government inquiry referencing ICIJ database use (New Zealand). 145
- A10** — DOJ press release on sentencing. 75
- A10** — Federal criminal judgment PDF. 146
- A11** — UK Parliament committee evidence page + background papers link. 147
- A11** — ICO final report on data analytics in political campaigns (PDF). 148
- A11** — Guardian/Observer investigative publication anchoring the scandal's emergence. 149
- A12** — Danske Bank investigation report PDF (Bruun & Hjejle). 150
- A12** — EU Parliament verbatim record referencing whistleblower hearing. 151
- A12** — DOJ press release on guilty plea and forfeiture. 152
- A12** — Bank's own announcement confirming coordinated resolutions. 153
- B1** — Caixin report on reprimand context and top-court response. 154
- B1** — Law Library of Congress analysis of reprimand under Chinese law. 155
- B1** — Major newspaper reporting on exoneration inquiry. 94
- B2** — Full whistleblower complaint text (PBS). 156
- B2** — Complaint PDF (as publicly posted). 157
- B3** — ICIJ FinCEN Files project page. 102
- B3** — Reuters summary emphasising SARs are not necessarily proof of wrongdoing. 104
- B4** — US Senate Commerce Committee written testimony PDF. 107
- B4** — Senate hearing page. 158
- B5** — Guardian investigative account of whistleblower perspective. 159
- B5** — UK Parliament written evidence PDF. 160
- B5** — UK Parliament committee notice about public evidence. 161

- B6** — ICIJ “MacGann comes forward” report. ¹⁶²
- B6** — European Parliament hearing page. ¹⁶³
- B6** — Written testimony to EMPL committee (PDF). ¹⁶⁴
- B6** — Guardian report capturing company counter-narrative about motives. ¹²¹

Recommendations for further archival and FOI research

A more comprehensive global census would require a structured, multi-lingual research programme. The most productive next steps are likely to be:

- **Court-file expansion:** systematically pull dockets, judgments and sentencing remarks for each case with known litigation, prioritising official repositories (e.g., HUDOC; govinfo; justice department archives; national court databases) and avoiding third-party reposts unless the original is unverifiable. ¹⁶⁵
- **FOI/FOIA targeting:** request (where legally feasible) key decision memos, charging decisions, and internal investigation summaries—especially for intelligence-adjacent cases where outcomes are opaque. Use oversight-body document libraries where they exist (e.g., surveillance oversight boards) to reduce time. ¹⁶⁶
- **Sector-specific registries and regulators:** for finance and tech, use regulator enforcement databases (FTC, ICO, SEC equivalents) paired with parliamentary committee evidence repositories to map disclosure → investigation → enforcement arcs. ¹⁶⁷
- **Non-English primary sources:** partner with language specialists (or use certified translations) for cases in CN, RU, IR, LATAM, and francophone jurisdictions where key primary evidence is not in English; this is critical for fairness and to avoid anglocentric selection bias. ¹⁶⁸

Finally, ethical handling matters: even well-documented whistleblowing claims can be contested; the safest approach is to (a) distinguish clearly between **allegations, official findings, and proven facts**, and (b) avoid extrapolating from one case to a broader claim without robust comparative evidence. ¹⁶⁹

¹ ⁷ ¹⁰ ²⁰ ²¹ ²⁴ ¹¹⁸ [New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713 \(1971\).](https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep403/usrep403713/usrep403713.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
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³ ⁵³ ⁵⁵ ¹³⁴ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-statement-request-hong-kong-edward-snowden-s-provisional-arrest>
<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-statement-request-hong-kong-edward-snowden-s-provisional-arrest>

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⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/ubs-enters-deferred-prosecution-agreement>
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https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2004-02-26/debates/44afcf07-b6d8-4e47-b880-729918cca26f/KatharineGun?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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62 126 140 <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?filename=Grand+Chamber+Judgment+Halet+v.+Luxembourg+-+Criminal+conviction+of+a+whistle-blower.pdf&id=003-7570478-10404854&library=ECHR>

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?filename=Grand+Chamber+Judgment+Halet+v.+Luxembourg+-+Criminal+conviction+of+a+whistle-blower.pdf&id=003-7570478-10404854&library=ECHR>

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